



How to contact me...

115-D Irving R. Newhouse Bldg.
P.O. Box 40407
Olympia, WA 98504-0407

Telephone: (360) 786-7612

Fax: (360) 786-1999

Toll-Free Hotline:

1-800-562-6000

E-mail: morton.bob@leg.wa.gov
(Please include your name and mailing address in the text of your e-mail.)

Web site: <http://www1.leg.wa.gov/Senate/SRC/Senators/Morton.htm>

Standing Committees

Water, Energy and Environment, ranking member; Agriculture and Rural Economic Development; and Natural Resources, Ocean and Recreation

Special Committees

Joint Legislative Committee on Water Supply During Drought; Joint Task Force on Rural Land Use and Economic Development; Western Legislative Forestry Task Force, past chairman; Select Committee of Forest Resources

Senator Bob MORTON

Dear Neighbors:

It is a pleasure to be back home in Orient after a long and grueling legislative session in Olympia.

First, I would like to thank those of you who responded to my pre-session questionnaire. Your answers help to shape my priorities for the session.

As always, it is my pleasure to take this opportunity to share with you some of the things the Legislature addressed this session, as well as some of the things on which I focused my efforts.

While I was able to work across party lines to accomplish some important things this session, on a broader scale, I would not characterize it as a productive session for our rural-suburban lifestyle. Our tax burden was increased to fund spending on state operations that grew by 12 percent, and a transportation plan that spends more than 67 percent of the package on Seattle-based and King County projects.

Election reform was the other major issue this session that the Legislature eluded, despite what you may have heard. Too many important improvements were left out to be considered true reform.

Proposals to bring down the cost of health care should be distinguished as false promises rather than real attempts to address the real cost drivers within the system.

Overall, it was a difficult session, but I look forward to and pledge to you my continuing efforts in Olympia and support policies to improve our quality of life in Northeast Washington.

Linda, my wife, and I count it an honor and a privilege to serve you. If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact my Olympia office.

Cordially yours,

Sen. Bob Morton

Budget

The 2005-07 operating budget, which **I VOTED AGAINST**, increases taxes by \$400.5 million to pay for a 12 percent spending increase. In early April, Senate Republicans offered a no-new-taxes spending plan for the next two years which was largely ignored by the majority party in favor of tax increases, despite fully funding our state's priorities.

In addition, the final budget approved by the Legislature, which I could not support:

- reestablishes the state's death tax;
- defers the state's pension funding obligation;

- adds the sales tax to extended warranties;
- ups the tax on cigarettes; and
- increases the tax on liquor.

	Senate Republican plan	Majority party approved
College enrollments	10,000 new enrollments	7,900 enrollments
Education initiatives	fully funds	partially funds
School district levy equalization	fully funds	reduces by \$12.9 million
Medicaid reimbursements	rate increase	no rate increase
Pension payment	fully pays	skips payment (risks lawsuit)
State park day use fees	eliminates day use fees	keeps day use fees
State employee collective bargaining	funds agreement	funds agreement
Fund reserve account	leaves healthy reserve	leaves low reserve

Transportation

The final \$12.5 billion transportation revenue package, which **I VOTED AGAINST**, contains the following tax and fee increases:

- 9.5-cent increase to the state gas tax over four years (3 cents in 2005; 3 cents in 2006, 2 cents in 2007; and 1.5 cents in 2008). Only \$8.5 billion can be used on new projects because the rest goes to paying off debt service.
- A new weight fee on vehicles (\$10 for small vehicles, \$20 for medium-sized vehicles, \$30 for large vehicles, and \$75 for motor homes)

This is extremely excessive taxation on our state's residents at a time when they can least afford it. This

additional cost, on top of the 12 percent increase in the general operating budget, will further delay our state's economic recovery while, at the same time, does very little to address transportation concerns in our neck of the woods.

The much-needed Central Avenue Bridge in Omak was excluded in the last hours of the session during a closed door meeting. Fortunately, the state Transportation Commission is currently using its discretion to consider this project and I will continue to encourage them of its importance.

☒ **A small win:** The state auditor will conduct performance audits of the state transportation system.

Environmental Overactivism

New auto emissions standards (ESHB 1397)

This measure adopts tough new auto emission standards for cars sold in Washington. The following amendments, important to the auto industry and consumers, were included in the measure:

- The Department of Ecology is prohibited from imposing quotas on car dealers to sell a certain number of super-clean-running zero-emission vehicles each year;
- New vehicles licensed in Washington, but purchased from out-of-state dealers, must meet the standards;
- Auto manufacturers may certify independent automobile repair shops to perform warranty service; and
- Washington's adoption of the standards is contingent upon adoption of the standards in Oregon.

When the governor signed **ESHB 1397** into law, Washington became the ninth state to require tougher emissions standards than federal law, which I believe to be adequate. The new standards, adopted from California law, will add to the cost of a vehicle between \$1,000 and \$3,000. The effect will likely be fewer SUVs, minivans and pickup trucks sold.

2SSB 5916, also signed into law, exempts new passenger cars, light-duty trucks and medium passenger vehicles exclusively powered by a clean alternative fuel or using "hybrid" technology with a rating of at least 40 miles per gallon from the sales and use tax for two years beginning in 2009. On a new car costing \$20,000, this could save the buyer nearly \$2,000.

Election Reforms

Two large election reform measures were approved by the Legislature this session:

Senate Bill 5743 addresses issues raised by the federal Help American Vote Act (HAVA):

- **Identification other than photo ID allowed at the polls**, including a current utility bill, bank statement, or paycheck. Voters without any identification will be given a provisional ballot.
- **Proof of citizenship is not required to register to vote**, but all state agencies that assist in voter registration must ask the applicant if he or she is at least 18 years old and if he or she is a U.S. citizen.
- Convicted felons must sign a statement acknowledging they have lost their right to vote and their voter registration will be canceled until their rights are restored.
- The secretary of state shall compare the voter registration database with those maintained by the state Department of Health, the Washington State Patrol, and the Office of the Administrator of the Courts to check for deaths and felony convictions.

Senate Bill 5499 is the omnibus election reform bill:

- The secretary of state shall develop guidelines for signature verification on ballot envelopes.
- Provisional and absentee ballots must be printed on colored paper or imprinted with a bar code so that they appear different from regular polling-place ballots.
- Ballots may not be enhanced. Damaged ballots may be duplicated so they can be counted electronically, but only if the voter's intent is clear. The original and duplicate ballot must be kept together and the process must be monitored by a team of two or more people.
- Ballots returned by mail that are unsigned require the voter to appear in person to resolve the situation.

I believe these election reform measures were too soft on reform. They didn't go far enough to clean up our election system and preserve the voting rights of living, law-abiding citizens. The following reforms, which I believe would have gone a long way to reform our flawed election system, were offered this session, but ignored:

- ✓ Require photo identification to vote at the polls;
- ✓ Require proof of U.S. citizenship and photo identification to register to vote;
- ✓ Require random checks of voter registration rolls for the deceased, felons, or noncitizens;
- ✓ Move the filing date for candidates to an earlier date to ensure military and overseas voters get their ballots in time;
- ✓ Allow military ballots to be counted if they are received late and, therefore, are returned after Election Day;
- ✓ Give auditors the help they need to manage their county elections;
- ✓ Implement a solid and uniform signature verification system;
- ✓ Prohibit third-party access to voter information to stop vote-shopping; and
- ✓ Require all county elections directors to be elected. Currently, only one elections official in our state is not elected — King County's is appointed, and not directly accountable to the public.

- A security flap is added to absentee return envelopes to protect voter identity.
 - At the time of certification, each county auditor must prepare a report that reconciles the number of registered voters with the number of regular, provisional and absentee ballots issued, counted and rejected.
- Every vote should have a voter.**

Health Care

The increasing costs and lack of access to health care, especially in rural areas of the state, affect families, employers, workers and taxpayers. Improving access and affordability is a high priority, however, there is a distinct difference in philosophy over how to address this issue. That, perhaps, may be the reason why the Legislature has yet to truly address it.

Efforts to pass laws forcing employers to buy coverage, loaded with mandates, will not suddenly make health care affordable, but the increased costs to the businesses will force them to lay off workers, close their doors, or take their jobs to other states. Efforts to implement government-run health care will only shift the costs from health care consumers to taxpayers.

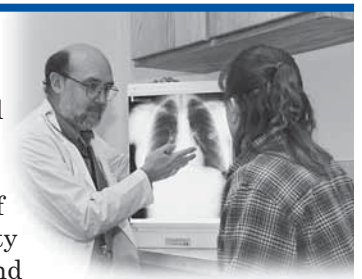
Ideas that get to the heart of the issue:

- Freezing benefit mandates that drive up the cost of health insurance would give us some time to evaluate

the cost effectiveness and need for the 48 existing benefit mandates;

- Truly reducing the cost of expensive medical liability insurance to help keep and attract doctors in our rural communities; and
- Encouraging the use of health savings accounts that empower patients and their doctors to make their own health care decisions.

Without getting to the core of what is driving the increasing costs and lack of access to health care, cost increases will continue to exceed inflation. Free-market solutions, rather than government-run approaches, will reduce the cost burden to taxpayers and facilitate a thriving world-class health care system.



Initiative Tinkering

The majority party this session either repealed or tried to repeal several initiatives approved by the people:

- **I-601**, approved by voters in 1993 by more than 51 percent of the vote, created a state spending limit and a “rainy day” fund to limit the growth of government. Although it has been chipped away for years, it was completely repealed this session in order to raise taxes to balance the budget – a bad move.
- **I-695**, approved by voters in 1999 by more than 56 percent of the vote, set motor vehicle license tab fees at \$30. The push for this initiative was based on the fact that car tab fees were erratic and not used directly for road improvements. This initiative was completely repealed this session.
- **I-402**, approved by voters in 1981 by more than 67 percent of the vote, abolished the state death tax. A smaller version of the now-abolished federal portion of the death tax was reimplemented this session to raise more revenues to balance the budget. Taxing the deceased is wrong.
- **I-200**, approved by voters in 1997 by more than 58 percent of the vote, prohibited the state from discriminating or granting preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in public employment, education and contracting. Although the spirit of this initiative has been largely ignored since its approval, many in the Legislature have attempted to repeal it altogether for years. They were not successful this session.

Emergency clause The excessive use of the emergency clause this session, I believe, was an attempt by many to shut voters out of their constitutional right to check and balance the Legislature through referendum because the emergency clause implements the new law immediately. I am particularly disturbed by the majority party’s efforts to cut the people out of their constitutionally granted policymaking rights via the initiative process.

Rain Barrel Tax

SB 5113 would have required a permit for anyone collecting rainwater in barrels. This is another attempt to expand the definition of state waters, a dangerous trend for private property owners and water right holders. I worked hard to successfully defeat the bill.

Morton Bills Signed Into Law

Senate Bill 5831 makes the construction and maintenance of wells safer and better ensures water quality by improving education and better involving local involvement in well inspection. (prime sponsor)

Senate Bill 5285 gives local governments more flexibility to improve their water quality. (co-sponsor)

Senate Bill 5111 encourages the manufacturing of solar energy systems in Washington state by providing a variety of tax incentives. (prime sponsor)

Senate Bill 5045 protects purchasers of property by allowing title insurance companies to provide a guarantee accepting financial responsibility for up to \$200,000 for fraudulent or dishonest acts committed by its title agents. (co-sponsor)

House Bill 2309 (includes the text of Senate Bill 5528) reduces inspection fees to private dam owners which encourages water storage and flood control, provides wetlands and habitat, and protects Washington’s rivers from silt and soil erosion. (prime sponsor)



The governor signs into law Senate Bill 5831, prime-sponsored by Sen. Morton.

Senator Bob MORTON
115-D Irving R. Newhouse Bldg.
P.O. Box 40407
Olympia, WA 98504-0407

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